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GENERAL DISCUSSION ON PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
AGENDA 21, FOCUSING ON THE CROSS-SECTORAL COMPONENTS OF
AGENDA 21 AND THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Note verbale dated 7 April 1994 from the Permanent
Representative of Norway to the United Nations
addressed to the Secretary-General

The Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations presents his compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and has the honour to submit a copy of a letter from the Minister of the Environment of Norway, Mr. Thorbjørn Berntsen, addressed to the Chairman of the Commission on Sustainable Development, His Excellency the Ambassador Ismail Razali, together with a copy of a brief summary report of the Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, held in Norway on 19 and 20 January 1994.

The high-level meeting of the first session of the Commission on Sustainable Development accepted the offer of the Minister to host this Symposium and to report back on the results. The summary report seeks to sum up main issues and proposals. It does not attempt to present an agreed common view. The contributions from the speakers at the Symposium as well as material provided for the Symposium by invited organizations are being reproduced in full and will be ready in time for the second session of the Commission in May. As a supplement to this report a shorter paper setting out issues raised at the Symposium has been prepared. Both documents are in English and will be made available to all delegations to the Commission. In addition, Mr. Thorbjørn Berntsen will present key ideas from the Symposium in a statement to the Commission in May.

In this letter, Mr. Thorbjørn Berntsen suggests that the enclosed brief summary report be made available in advance of the upcoming session of the Commission as an official conference document.

* E/CN.17/1994/1.

ANNEX

Letter dated 28 March 1994 from the Minister of the
Environment of Norway addressed to the Chairman of
the Commission on Sustainable Development

I have the honour to transmit to you the enclosed brief summary report of the Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, held in Norway on 19 and 20 January 1994. It seeks to sum up main issues and proposals; it does not attempt to present an agreed common view. As you will recall, the high-level meeting of the first session of the Commission on Sustainable Development accepted my offer to host this Symposium and to report back on the results.

The contributions from the speakers as well as material provided for the Symposium by invited organizations are being reproduced in full and will be ready in time for the meeting of the Commission. As a supplement to this full report, a shorter paper setting out issues raised at the Symposium has been prepared. Both documents are in English and will be made available to all delegations.

Owing to the length of both these documents, we assume that it will be impractical to translate them into the working languages of the United Nations. I will, however, present key ideas to the Commission when it meets in May, and would appreciate it if the enclosed brief summary could be made available in advance as an official conference document.

(Signed) Thorbjørn BERNTSEN

Appendix

SUMMARY REPORT: THE SYMPOSIUM ON SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Oslo, 19 and 20 January 1994

Background

Agenda 21 states that the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances (para. 4.3). Agenda 21 further notes that developed countries should take the lead in achieving sustainable consumption patterns (para. 4.8 (b)).

At the high-level meeting of the first session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in June 1993, Norway offered to host a meeting on sustainable consumption, as a first step towards the follow-up of the relevant recommendations in Agenda 21. Norway also undertook to present the background papers and a summary report from the meeting as a contribution to the discussions at the forthcoming session of the Commission in May 1994.

The agenda of the Symposium is attached. The Symposium focused on the industrialized countries and covered overall aspects of sustainable consumption including key areas such as energy and transport. It discussed possible indicators of progress made and how to achieve necessary changes, addressing the questions. What can and should each sector of society do? What can and should Governments do nationally? What can be achieved through international cooperation?

The main Symposium round-table meeting involved 40 participants, mainly from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The President of Iceland, the Prime Minister of Norway, and Ministers from the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and Norway, as well as high officials, eminent experts and representatives of key organizations and sectors, participated. Forty observers also attended.

Results

The contributions of the speakers as well as material prepared for the Symposium by invited organizations have been reproduced in full. The papers will provide a wide range of facts, concepts and suggestions for further work. They are available to all delegations at the session of the Commission. Norway hopes that this material will enrich the deliberations and promote the follow-up, both nationally and internationally.

As a supplement to the Symposium papers, a summary of the main issues and of the proposals made during the Symposium is also being made available to all delegations.

The Symposium confirmed that there is broad international agreement that the matter of changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must be tackled on a priority basis. The industrialized countries should assume a leading role, but all Governments as well as non-governmental organizations must cooperate in the process of change. Encouraging processes are taking place, but these are too few and fall far short of the magnitude of effort needed.

There was a broad consensus that there is a need for a detailed analysis of the relationship between production and consumption patterns and their environmental, economic and social impacts. To ensure progress towards this end, both Governments and appropriate international institutions should commit themselves to working together and giving the highest priority to the areas where change will have most effect. The main thrust of the discussion included the following points:

- (a) Studies are needed of trends in and damage from patterns of consumption and production, notably of energy use, transport, waste production, and use of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, to assess their sustainability;
- (b) Studies are needed on the effects that consumption and production patterns in one country have on other countries. The studies should clearly identify global, regional and local impacts and the issues of equity and "environmental space" should be examined;
- (c) Based on these studies, priorities must be set so that the most damaging effects of unsustainable consumption patterns can be addressed. Past damage must be alleviated but a main task is to avoid building up new "environmental debts". Some problems connected with the consumption of a product can be more easily solved at the production stage; other problems can be solved only by reducing the volume and pattern of consumption. In the chain from design and raw material extraction through use to final disposal, actions must be taken at the points where they are most effective;
- (d) Many countries already have practices and infrastructure that lead to consumption with low environmental impacts. When modernizing their economies, this should be preserved;
- (e) Studies are needed on the relative effectiveness of a spectrum of instruments for changing unsustainable patterns. This would encompass regulatory and administrative instruments, economic instruments (including the removal of subsidies), voluntary measures such as industry targets and standards, management tools, eco-labelling and other measures to increase public awareness and participation;
- (f) Enough experience exists to support an increase in "green taxes" and user charges; this would allow for corresponding reductions of other taxes. If used to reduce taxes on labour, this would stimulate employment. Pricing policies in general as well as liability rules should internalize the environmental costs of risk and damage;

(g) Enough experience also exists to indicate that the use of voluntary measures such as International Organization for Standardization (ISO) quality control and production standards, the use of green auditing and transparent and differentiated green labelling should increase;

(h) To achieve more sustainable energy use, the cost and environmental results from demand-side measures to increase efficiency and reduce consumption should be considered at the same time as expansion of capacity is evaluated. Similar reasoning should apply to transport and waste. On the supply side, renewable energy sources should be given special consideration;

(i) Expanded programmes are needed on education, training, public awareness and participation;

(j) Pilot projects to demonstrate the effect of changed consumption patterns should be supported and the results should be made widely available. The need for cooperative approaches to solving problems, including through technology cooperation and transfer and by changes to existing trade patterns, should be studied;

(k) Indicators to measure progress towards the goal should be developed;

(l) Governments should publish periodic reports on progress made towards sustainable consumption. These reports could be assessed by the Commission.

Further work

The Commission on Sustainable Development may wish to consider launching a broad cooperative process inside and outside the United Nations system involving Governments, industry, and research and voluntary organizations. This could focus on unsustainable patterns of production and consumption as well as on the development of national policies and strategies to encourage changes.

On the basis of the discussions at the Commission, Ministers may agree to:

(a) Establish a network among interested countries for exchanging information on practical experience in promoting sustainable consumption;

(b) Establish a task force of experts designated by interested Governments to prepare a work programme to be considered at the next high-level meeting of the Commission. The report should give recommendations on ways and means to achieve more sustainable patterns of production and consumption involving both the private and public sectors. The report could take advantage of experience, data and analysis provided, inter alia, by the OECD countries.
